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US envoy in Honduras uneasy in the spotlight

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras - The tension was thick this week in the US embassy here.

In the space of a few days, Time magazine and the New York Times published reports describing in detail the role of Ambassador John D. Negroponte in directing a covert CIA operation to support Nicaraguan exiles fighting against the Sandinistas.

Last Sunday, the Miami Herald carried a reprint from Mother Jones magazine describing Negroponte as one of the "10 worst ambassadors in the world." It was on many newsstands here.

Friday, a delegation, including two Democratic congressmen and the former ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, landed in town. All three are strong opponents of Reagan Administration policy in Central America.

"The ambassador is less than enthusiastic about all this," said one cautious aide.

John Dimitri Negroponte, 43, was well-liked by the press as a young career diplomat in Vietnam in the late '60s. He was a protege to Henry Kissinger at the Paris peace talks.

He was an obvious choice to be the Reagan Administration's taskmaster in Honduras. He shares the same passionate enmity for the Sandinista government as the head of the Honduran armed forces, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez Martinez. Alvarez is described as the other key man in the Nicaraguan exile operation.

Diplomatic colleagues say Negroponte and Alvarez have shared the sometimes close, sometimes prickly relation of two highly skilled crusaders.

The State Department policy of no comment about the covert operation puts the ambassador at a disadvantage with the press. "He is



JOHN NEGROPONTE
Reagan's taskmaster in Honduras

itching to respond to some of the attacks," said one embassy official. Reporters can often see Negroponte's color rising as they run through provocative questions he is prevented from answering.

Though Negroponte has taken the heat, virtually all of the major leaks that exposed the CIA support for the Nicaraguan exiles came from Washington, or from the exiles themselves.

However, reporters were able to find sources around Negroponte who could confirm details. The determined diplomat was not always able to marshal full support for Reagan policy from his ranks.

"Right now, we're just circling the wagons," said one embassy official. Others said they wouldn't be surprised if there are personnel changes here soon.

- JULIA PRESTON